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SUBJECT: JAPANESE MORNING PRESS HIGHLIGHTS 03/20/07

- 1) Top headlines
- 2) Editorials
- 3) Prime Minister's daily schedule

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- 4) Abe Cabinet support rate slips again for fifth month in row in Yomiuri poll, now at 43.8% and below non-support rate of 43.9%
- 5) Nikkei poll finds 70% of voters expressing "interest" in upcoming unified local elections

North Korea talks:

- 6) US's political judgment to give priority to DPRK nuclear issue allowed compromise settlement of financial sanctions issue
- 7) Japan kept out of the loop as US negotiated with North Korea on BDA funds
- 8) Prime Minister Abe waiting to see how DPRK scrapping of nuclear program will play out in six-party talks
- 9) Abe: US removal of financial sanctions will not affect Japan's resolution of abduction issue
- 10) Japan will keep its sanctions against North Korea in place
- 11) China and Russia support Japan on abduction issue during talks with North Korea
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Iraq reconstruction:

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- 14) Defense Minister Kyuma considering visit to Iraq to view ASDF

operation, meet prime minister

15) In unusual move, Defense Ministry to keep Vice Minister Moriya on in his post even longer due to his experience and the load of tasks to handle

16) Comfort-women issue drawing widespread international attention

Political agenda:

17) Diet to pass the budget bill on March 26

18) Ruling parties plan to ram the national constitutional referendum bill through the Diet, hoping that the opposition Minshuto will split when vote is taken

19) Upper House Budget Committee session stalled due to "agriculture minister issue"

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Akahata:

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(2) Developmentally disabled persons: Communities should prepare for them

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(2) Minimum wage: Need for measures to reduce working poor

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(1) Denso incident: Control of classified information should be stricter

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(1) Effective plan needed to ban amakudari

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(1) Six-party talks: Don't fall into North Korea's trap

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Akahata:

SDF personnel should be immediately withdrawn from Iraq

3) Prime Minister's Official Residence (Kantei)

Prime Minister's schedule, March 19

NIHON KEIZAI (Page 2) (Full)  
March 20, 2007

09:59

Met with Vice Foreign Minister Yachi at the Kantei.

10:35

Met with Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary Suzuki.

11:45

Met with Katayama, secretary general of LDP members in the House of Councillors.

13:00

Upper House Budget Committee meeting.

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17:07

Party executive meeting held in the Diet building.

18:04

Met with Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. Then attended a ceremony to sign a protocol for amending the Japan-Singapore economic partnership agreement and a joint press conference.

19:14

Dinner party at the official residence hosted by the prime minister and his wife.

4) Poll: Abe cabinet's nonsupport rate at 43.9%, support rate at 43.8%

YOMIURI (Page 2) (Abridged)  
March 20, 2007

The rate of public support for Prime Minister Abe and his cabinet was 43.8% in a face-to-face nationwide public opinion survey conducted by the Yomiuri Shimbun on March 17-18, down 1.5 percentage points from the 45.3% rating in this February's survey. The Abe cabinet's support rate dropped for the fifth month in a row. The nonsupport rate was 43.9%, up 1.2 points. Though slightly with a margin of 0.1 point, the Abe cabinet's nonsupport rate topped its support rate for the first time since its inauguration.

The figure can be taken as reflecting Agriculture Minister Matsuoka's murky way of handling political funds over his office's utilities and the ruling Liberal Democratic Party's reinstatement of Seiichi Eto, who is one of the so-called postal rebels and a former House of Representatives member.

Broken down into makes and females, the Abe cabinet's support rate was 42% among men and 46% among women. Among men, the nonsupport rate (48% ) topped the support rate.

By age, the nonsupport rate topped the support rate among those in their 20s to 50s. On the whole, however, the support rate seems to have stopped falling. The support rate went up 6 points among those in their 20s and went down 4 points among those in their 50s.

Those who do not support the Abe cabinet were further asked to pick up to two reasons. In their breakdown, 44% said they could not appreciate its political stance, with 32% saying it is unstable and 27% saying they cannot trust the prime minister.

In the breakdown of public support for political parties, the LDP stood at 36.4%, up 2.2 points from February. The leading opposition Democratic Party of Japan (Minshuto) was at 11.3%, down 0.7 point. The proportion of those with no particular party affiliation was 46.0%, down 0.8 point.

5) Poll: 70% interested in upcoming local elections

NIHON KEIZAI (Page 2) (Abridged)  
March 20, 2007

According to findings from a public opinion survey conducted by the Nihon Keizai Shimbun on March 16-18, a total of about 70% answered "yes" when asked if they were interested in this April's local elections, broken down into 24% saying they are very interested and

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45% somewhat interested. The proportion of those who were not very interested was 20%, and those not interested at all accounted for 4%. Younger generations were less interested. Among those in their 20s, "yes" totaled only a little over 50%.

Respondents were asked to pick a matter of primary concern to them in the upcoming local elections. In response to this question, "healthcare and welfare" topped all other answers at 27%, followed by "local fiscal reconstruction," "childcare support and low birthrate countermeasures," and "education" at 12% each. "Politics and money" was at 10%.

The survey was taken by Nikkei Research Inc. over the telephone on a random digit dialing (RDD) basis. For the survey, samples were chosen from among men and women aged 20 and over across the nation. A total of 1,568 households with one or more voters were sampled, and answers were obtained from 901 persons.

6) Close-up 2007 -- Frozen North Korean funds issue settled politically with priority given to nuclear issue, but contradictions and concessions exposed

MAINICHI (Page 3) (Lead paragraph)  
March 20, 2007

Toshihiko Kasahara, Seiji Nishioka, Takuji Nakata, Beijing

The financial sanctions issue, a thorn in the six-party talks aimed at resolving North Korea's nuclear issue, has now been resolved. The settlement came after the United States made concessions without examining whether the North Korean funds deposited in Macao's Banco Delta Asia are illegal or not. The multilateral talks will now move on to debate specific procedures for the North Koreans to dismantle their nuclear facilities. But in dealing with the focal issue of its uranium enrichment program, the existence of which the North has rejected, the North Koreans may again take a tough position. It is thus too early to say that the six-party talks are now on track.

7) Japan out of loop until just before settlement?

MAINICHI (Page 3) (Full)  
March 20, 2007

This round of the six-party talks has made Japan realize a big difference in progress between the nuclear issue and the abduction issue. The decision to fully lift the financial sanctions now imposed on North Korea has given impetus to North Korea's move to implement the first-stage action for scrapping its nuclear weapons-related facilities, but the abduction issue has been left behind. The rapprochement between the United States and North Korea is a matter of concern for Japan, which thinks Washington's backing is indispensable for the abduction issue to move forward.

Japan's chief negotiator, Kenichi Sasae, director-general of the Foreign Ministry's Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau, reacted strongly against North Korean Vice Foreign Minister Kim Kye Gwan's remark that Japan, which has cited the abduction issue as the reason why it will not provide aid to North Korea, "will be disqualified from the six-party talks." Sasae said, "It's not worth commenting on that remark."

The focus of discussions is shifting to the "next action" that

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includes disabling all nuclear facilities. Japan is highly likely to be asked to join in the aid program for supplying 950,000 tons of heavy fuel oil to the North. Japan, which has made "progress on the abduction issue" a precondition for it to provide aid to North Korea, is looking for ways to hold a bilateral meeting with North Korea while the six-party talks are in session, but a senior Foreign Ministry official pessimistically said, "All we can do now is exchange pleasantries while standing."

Japan hopes to see the US and other countries back Japan and move to persuade North Korea. In the six-party session yesterday, US Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill criticized North Korea for walking out of the meeting of the Japan-North Korea working group as "an insincere attitude." Sasae looked satisfied with that remark, saying, "The session appeared to share the view that (North Korea) must engage in talks appropriately."

At an Upper House Budget Committee meeting yesterday, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe commented, "There may be a move to try to drive a wedge between Japan and the US, but I want to analyze the situation together (with the US)." But some pointed out that the information about America's full removal of the financial sanctions was not available to the Foreign Ministry until just before the declaration of America's decision to do so.

8) Prime Minister Abe: Will pay close attention to DPRK's move to abandon nuclear ambitions

NIHON KEIZAI (Page 2) (Full)  
March 20, 2007

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was asked yesterday by the press corps at the Kantei about America's decision to lift financial sanctions against North Korea and stressed: "We must keep tabs on North Korea to see whether it takes specific measures to dispose of its nuclear facilities." "When it comes to whether there will be any impact on the resolution of the abduction issue, I don't think there will be much," he added.

Chief Cabinet Secretary Yasuhisa Shiozaki told the press: "Japan and the United States are keeping in close contact with each other and share the same perception."

9) Prime Minister Abe: Not much impact on resolution of the abduction issue

MAINICHI (Page 3) (Full)  
March 20, 2007

Yu Koyama

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, when asked yesterday about America's decision to fully unfreeze North Korea-related bank accounts, told reporters: "I don't think there will be much impact on the resolution of the abduction issue." Asked about the impact on the six-party talks, Abe said, "It will have basically nothing to do with the talks."

10) Japan to continue its sanctions on North Korea

NIHON KEIZAI (Page 3) (Full)  
March 20, 2007

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Following North Korea's missile launches last July, Japan has independently imposed sanctions on the North, and the international community has slapped sanctions on that country based on a UN Security Council resolution condemning Pyongyang's nuclear test. Those steps are still in place today. Since last September, Tokyo has also been regulating cash remittances to 15 organizations and one individual believed to be involved in the development of weapons of mass destruction in compliance with the Foreign Exchange and Foreign Trade Control Law.

The Finance Ministry's perception is that the decision to defreeze North Korean funds held at Banco Delta Asia was made independently between Washington and Pyongyang and that it has no direct bearing on Japan's steps. In other words, Tokyo's position is that it will continue with its financial sanctions unless there is progress on the abduction issue or changes to the UN resolution. The concession on the BDA by the United States, the country leading the pressure policy toward North Korea, might cast a shadow on other countries' responses to the UNSC sanctions that are already out of step with each other.

11) Abduction issue at six-party talks: China, Russia support Japan

TOKYO SHIMBUN (Page 1) (Full)  
March 20, 2007

Beijing, Shohei Yoshida

North Korean Vice Foreign Minister Kim Gye Gwan, after the six-party talks restarted on Mar. 19, criticized Japan as sticking only to its stance of prioritizing progress on the abduction issue. The US, China and Russia then announced their support for Japan's position. This is perhaps the first time for those countries to announce support for Japan referring to Japan-North Korea issue at a venue of a top-envoy-level meeting, according to a source close to the Japanese delegate.

Kenichiro Sasae, top envoy from Japan, during a meeting of chief delegates held in the afternoon, touched on the North Korean envoy's leaving the Japan-North Korea working group meeting held in Hanoi part way. He criticized North Korea's behavior, "North Korea did not indicate any readiness to enter into specific discussions."

Chief envoy from the US Christopher Hill, assistant secretary of state, sought an early resumption of the Japan-North Korea working group meeting, noting, "It is not a sincere attitude to leave a meeting part way. North Korea should be prepared to bring about concrete results in talks with Japan."

Russian Vice Foreign Minister Roshkov also said with the abduction issue in mind that it is necessary to discuss any issue, even if it is a matter of concern only for one country. Kim, however, stressed his nation's stance that the abduction issue has already been settled. He said, "We have done everything we could do."

12) Sasae: North Korea lacked sincerity in talks on abduction issue

MAINICHI (Page 3) (Full)  
March 20, 2007

Takuji Nakata, Beijing

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In a session of the six-party talks that started yesterday, Japan's chief envoy to the six-party talks, Kenichiro Sasae, director-general of the Foreign Ministry's Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau, briefed other participants on the recent meeting of the Japan-North Korea working group for diplomatic normalization held in Hanoi, Vietnam, and criticized North Korea: "It lacked sincerity in dealing with the abduction issue at the time." In response, North Korean Vice Foreign Minister Kim Kye Gwan rebutted, "We did all we could." What stood out in the session yesterday was that there was no sign of progress in Japan-North Korea relations.

According to an account made by the Japanese side, Sasae called on North Korea to assume a sincere attitude in dealing with the abduction issue, saying, "North Korea needs to tackle the issue seriously and squarely."

Following the Japanese side's briefing, US Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill said, "North Korea should fully prepare itself to produce specific results in the Japan-North Korea working group," and sought to resume the working group session as quickly as possible.

13) Prime Minister Abe indicates intention to continue to support Iraq reconstruction process

TOKYO SHIMBUN (Page 3) (Full)  
March 20, 2007

With the Iraq war marking the fourth year today since its opening, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe yesterday evening noted: "I am deeply concerned that sectarian violence in Iraq is getting fierce. I hope Iraq will regain peace and stability as soon as possible. Japan must contribute to that end along with the international community." He thus indicated his intention to continue activities to help with reconstruction in Iraq by Self-Defense Force troops.

The prime minister underscored, "The international community working in concert will lead to creating a safer Middle East and world." He was replying questions asked by reporters at the Prime Minister's Official Residence.

14) Kyuma considering visiting Iraq

ASAHI (Page 4) (Full)  
March 20, 2007

Defense Minister Fumio Kyuma is considering visiting Iraq's capital of Baghdad around the Golden Week holiday period from late April through early May to take a first look at the Kuwait-based Air Self-Defense Force's airlift mission and to hold meetings with Iraqi leaders, including Prime Minister Maliki. With the government aiming to pass a bill intended to extend the Iraq Special Measures Law, scheduled to expire at the end of July, for two years, Kyuma has recognized the need to take a first look at the situation in Iraq. Kyuma has repeatedly expressed his wishes to visit Iraq before Diet begins deliberating on the special measures law. But there is a possibility that the Japan-U.S. Security Consultative Committee of foreign and defense ministers (2+2) will meet in the United States around the Golden Week holiday period. The government will work out a detailed timetable for Kyuma.

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15) Moriya to stay on as vice defense minister

TOKYO (Page 2) (Abridged)  
March 20, 2007

The government decided yesterday to retain Administrative Vice Defense Minister Takemasa Moriya though he is scheduled for retirement in late March. Moriya is to stay on after April. It is unusual to extend the retirement age of an administrative vice minister. Moriya assumed his current post in August 2003. It has been customary for the top administrative officials of government ministries and agencies to be replaced in one or two years, so Moriya is a rare case as a long-serving administrative vice minister.

In addition to the pending issue of realigning US forces in Japan, the Diet is expected to face rough going in its deliberations over the issue of extending the Air Self-Defense Force's airlift mission in Iraq. The government deemed it appropriate to retain Moriya in consideration of his rich experience.

The extension of Moriya's retirement age is expected to be for one year. However, Moriya could leave his post on his own in late July when he will have been in his post for four years, if there are prospects for the pending issue of relocating the US Marine Corps' Futenma Air Station in Ginowan, Okinawa Prefecture, and for the Defense Facilities Administration Agency's scrap-and-build reorganization scheduled for September.

16) Foreign leaders show strong interest in comfort women issue, expressing perplexity and calling for explanation

ASAHI (Page 4) (Full)  
March 20, 2007

Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong held a meeting with New Komeito Representative Akihiro Ota in Tokyo yesterday. Touching on the wartime comfort women issue, Lee expressed concern over Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's remarks denying "coercion in the narrow sense," saying, "I am perplexed by recent arguments in Japan." Ota explained: "Prime Minister Abe explicitly stated that the government would continue upholding the Kono Statement."

Canadian Foreign Minister Peter MacKey discussed the six-party talks and other matters with Foreign Minister Taro Aso on the phone later in the day. In the conversation, the Canadian leader also touched on the comfort women issue. According to the Foreign Ministry, MacKey said, "Although there are all sorts of reports, I would like to know Japan's position," bearing in mind reports in Canada and the United States on Tokyo's denial of the use of coercion. In response, Aso said: "The prime minister expressed his heartfelt sympathy and apologies toward the former comfort women. He said so in the Diet. There has been no change in his position of following the Kono Statement."

17) FY2007 budget to clear Diet as early as March 26

MAINICHI (Page 5) (Full)  
March 20, 2007

The directors of the House of Councillors Budget Committee yesterday discussed a schedule for deliberations on a bill on the budget for

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fiscal 2007. The ruling coalition proposed the idea of holding an intensive debate and putting the bill to a vote on March 23. The opposition camp, however, opposed the proposition, claiming that sufficient time cannot be secured, as the plenary sessions are scheduled to be held in both chambers of the Diet on March 23. The committee will hold a meeting again today.

One senior Upper House member of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) said, "There is no need to insist on our position." Chances are that the ruling camp will give up on its plan to take a vote on the 23rd. The likelihood is that the FY2007 budget bill will be put to a vote at the budget committee and the full session of the Upper House as early as March 26.

18) Ruling coalition to take vote on national referendum bill without attendance of opposition lawmakers

MAINICHI (Page 5) (Lead para.)  
March 20, 2007

In order to push a bill through the House of Representatives in mid-April outlining procedures for a national referendum, which is needed to amend the Constitution, the ruling parties will likely put the bill to a vote in the absence of the opposition parties. The ruling coalition aims to play up the early passage of the legislation and split Minshuto, which is divided over the bill. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe intends to take up constitutional reform as a campaign issue for the House of Councillors election this summer. The ruling camp also intends to take a hard-line stance in running a set of bills related to the budget for fiscal 2007 through the Diet before the end of March. The standoff between the ruling and opposition blocs will likely intensify with an eye on the Upper House election in the summer. The dominant view is that the second half of the current Diet session will inevitably encounter difficulties.

19) Upper House Budget Committee session stalled due to "agriculture minister issue"

MAINICHI (Page 5) (Full)  
March 20, 2007

In an intensive session yesterday of the House of Councillors Budget Committee, the focus was more on the huge utility costs claimed by Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries Minister Toshikatsu Matsuoka than such issues as social security and the income gap. Although the issue of his utility expenses prevented intensive deliberations on



the original agenda, Matsuoka continued to refuse to disclose the details of the huge utility costs, replying, "I have filed my political funds reports in accordance with the law." Prime Minister Shinzo Abe also continued to support him using the same words.

It has been learned that not only Matsuoka but also Hiroshi Nakai of the main opposition party Minshuto (Democratic Party of Japan) booked huge utility expenditures in their political funds reports even though their offices are in the rent-free Diet members' building, which does not charge any utilities. Nakai has, however, at least held press conferences to explain his case.

Masao Kobayashi of Minshuto pursued the Matsuoka scandal, saying, "A similar case was unveiled in our party, too, but our party member held a press briefing immediately to explain his case." Matsuoka,

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however, again reiterated: "I have done everything that the law stipulates." Since the unified local elections are approaching, some lawmakers in the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) have begun expressing displeasure with Matsuoka's stance. Taking advantage of such a mood in the ruling coalition, Kobayashi urged Abe to direct Matsuoka to fulfill his accountability and to dismiss him if he does not accept his advice. Abe, however, made this reply again: "I want him to fulfill his job, keeping in mind the importance of agriculture, forestry and fisheries policy."

20) Cabinet meeting for post-Kyoto protocol: Government plans to strengthen global warming preventive measures

YOMIURI (Page 1) (Full)  
March 20, 2007

The government aims to see the signing of a new post-Kyoto protocol that would set an international target for cutting emissions of greenhouse gasses starting in 2013. In this connection, it has decided to look into setting up a specific framework.

Prime Minister Abe will announce during a meeting of the government's Global Warming Preventive Measures Promotion Headquarters to be held today his resolve to have Japan lead the world in the effort to create a post-Kyoto protocol framework. He will order the establishment of a cabinet council comprising of Chief Cabinet Secretary Shiozaki, Environment Minister Wakabayashi, Economy, Trade and Industry Minister Amari and Foreign Minister Aso.

The government wants to put environmental issues, such as global warming preventive measures, on the agenda of the Summit to be held in Japan in 2008. To this end, it will strengthen Environment Ministry-led efforts and press ahead with the work of looking into a post-Kyoto protocol framework.

The envisaged cabinet meeting is expected to discuss Japan's measures to cut greenhouse gas emissions and the possibility of creating a framework involving the US, which is not a party to the Kyoto Protocol, and China and India, which are not obligated to cut greenhouse gas emissions.

SCHIEFFER